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The Working Committee of the Department on Evangelism plans a long-range study of the relationship between Church and Gospel in Evangelism (cf. Monthly Letter about Evangelism, Numbers 6-8, November 1960, p. 3f.). Describing this study it was said, "Christians do often give the impression that they are interested in the man in the street only in so far as he may become a man in the pew." In the discussion on the study program this hidden misunderstanding of evangelism was called "proselytism". The following paper may serve in preparing the study. It has been published in Dutch under the title "Over het proselitisme" in a collection of studies on the occasion of the 60th birthday of the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches: Oecumene in 't vizier, feestbundel voor Dr. W.A. Visser 't Hooft, ed. W.F. Golterman and J.C. Hoekendijk, W. ten Have N.V., Amsterdam 1960, 101-110.

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ON PROSELYTISM

Prof. Dr. J.C. Hoekendijk

"Die fundamentale ökumenische Verhaltensregel ist der Verzicht auf Proselytismus." (1) (The fundamental rule of ecumenical conduct is to refrain from proselytism.)

It almost seems as if proselytism has become the exact opposite of ecumenism, signifying all those ideas, claims, sentiments and actions which are contrary to the ecumenical movement. Anyone whose behaviour still shows a tendency to proselytise immediately cuts himself off from ecumenism. This is already clear from reading Zinzendorf and it is not a bad idea to accept his guidance for once. (2)

He defines: "Proselytenmachen heiszt einen Menschen bereden, dasz er so rede wie ich, so thut wie ich, in eine Verfassung tritt wie ich, auf Hoffnung es wird noch einmal gut werden." (Proselytism means persuading someone to speak as I do, to act as I do, to think as I do, in the hope that he will one day become good.) Seen from this aspect, proselytism is tantamount to what we usually call propaganda. For we are trying to make other people into "replicas of ourselves" (3), in the absolute conviction that the only 'hope' for others is to model themselves on us. We imagine that there is no hope for anyone who is not a mirror of ourselves, and so we endeavour to recruit partisans-in-our-uniform. How? The methods are not very important. We try, in fact, "Leute durch Persuasiones und durch allerhand Methoden auf unsere Seite zu bringen und unseren Anhang zahlreich zu machen - es mögen dann die Leute in ihren Herzen aussehen wie sie wollen." (by all sorts of methods and forms of persuasion to get people on our side and to increase our followers - whatever these people may really be like in their hearts.) We consider it so important to make them join one homogeneous, monochrone group that we are not deterred by any bothersome considerations as to whether our methods are legitimate or the proselytes' motives pure. In our opinion, the end justifies the means.

Now Zinzendorf would not be himself if he did not seize the opportunity to play a bit with the foreign word 'proselyte' (=someone added). He 'translates' it sometimes by 'parvenu': someone who is added, who has 'arrived' and who now looks back condescendingly towards the country he just left. In this way he sketches a true portrait of many converts, and intends to give an exegesis of Matth. 23:15. He clearly has this whole chapter, Matth. 23, in mind when he describes proselytism. He considers it characteristic that merely incidental elements seem to assume such mysterious importance. For these are the people that "strain out a gnat" and insist on irrelevant details; they lose all sense of proportion; having lost sight of what is essential, they regard everything as important, and "bind heavy burdens ... on men's shoulders" (Matth. 23:4). This is an offence against the Christ's carefully differentiated (Mannigfaltigkeit!) 'method' and therefore it is also a violation of 'simple souls': "denen etwas ins Gemüth gebracht wird, das ihnen vielleicht nach wenigen Jahren nicht mehr wichtig ist". (for it teaches them things which perhaps will be of no more importance to them in a few years' time.) Conclusion: "Proselyten zu den Ecclesien machen ist eine unnütze Arbeit: wir wissen ja aus der Erfahrung, dasz die Leute nicht bleiben, sondern wieder davonlaufen; es ist auch eine unnötige Arbeit: denn es wird kein einziger den Weg zur Gemeine verfehlen, der dazu gehört." (Gaining proselytes for churches is a fruitless task; we know from experience that these proselytes don't stay in their new churches, but soon leave them. It is also an unnecessary task, for no one will miss the way to the church if he belongs to it.) Zinzendorf therefore cannot understand why so many church assemblies devote so much discussion to this question and want to put a stop to proselytism "denn das verbietet sich von selbsten". (for it excludes itself by its very nature.)

So far this 'forerunner of ecumenism'.

Since then, however, it has become clearer that it doesn't go that easily "von selbsten". We can quickly settle the question of the propaganda-complex pointed out by Zinzendorf. We have no difficulty in denouncing with indignation this evident corruption of the christian testimony (by other people, of course, for we never do so) and 'prohibiting' it once and for all. Is it not, in the end, becoming rather ridiculous and quixotic to tilt against such windmills with all our theological flags unfurled, as if it were part of the liturgy of ecumenical meetings.

The second complex, church-proselytism, however, is a more complicated matter. We should after all like to maintain the general principle, in direct opposition to Zinzendorf, that it is not merely 'useful' but in fact 'necessary' to make proselytes for the churches. In nearly all the respectable definitions of evangelism this is emphatically affirmed. In other words, it is true. We have sweetened our language. We now prefer to speak of 'extending the Church' or even of 'recruiting new members'. Or: 'we invite people to join (to enter into the fellowship of) a Church'. That sounds more harmless and innocent, but in reality it is exactly the same. Church-proselytism, even if it is expressed in cautious formulas, is recognised and accepted as a legitimate and genuine element in evangelism.

It is only when one passes from general principles to particular situations that questions and problems arise: In missionary work, for instance, especially in India and in Muslim countries, and wherever two or more churches are competing in evangelism. During the 19th and 20th centuries this phenomenon has become more and more general. It is difficult today to find countries where there is only one church. The old compact, stable, confessional blocs have split up. Society has trown people into constant movement. Movement has become the characteristic sign of our times. People move from one 'church area' to another. Whole populations are displaced and as refugees pass over the confessional frontiers. It has become impossible to divide geographical areas between the churches. They are continually coming up against one another in their efforts to proselytise, and this competitive church-proselytism within one geographical area has become a primary ecumenical problem.

In order to define this ecumenical problem in more detail, I think we have to mention a third factor: reform-revivalism; for it is only by so doing that one can throw some light on the problem of the conflict between old and 'new' churches about 'proselytism'.

If, like Newbigin (4), we draw a broad distinction in the chaotic church-situation between three types (Catholic, Protestant and 'Pentecostal') and if, like Molland (5), we place them on a line running from Tradition to Spirit (it's a matter of emphasis here, of course) we obtain the following outline:

Pentecostalists - Protestant Churches - Catholic Churches

S P I R I T - T R A D I T I O N

——————→ REFORM-REVIVALISM ——————→

It appears repeatedly that the movement from left to right is motivated by reform-revivalism. This concerns only the revival of the old(er) 'traditional' churches, often for the express purpose of engaging in missionary work together. To confine ourselves to some examples, notorious in the history of ecumenism: through reform during the 19th century the Anglicans tried to "train for their service" the Mar Thoma Christians in South-India "as the great evangelistic church in this sub-continent". And it is through a rivival of the old churches ('orthodox' or not) in the Middle East that the much-criticised American mission has sought to penetrate Islam and Israel with the Christian message. (6) The same thing is happening today in the Roman Catholic church in Latin America through the impact of Christian movements such as the World Student Christian Federation.

In the above cases the motive was certainly not to win proselytes from the old churches. This was often expressly forbidden, in fact. The aim was to find cooperators and allies with a view to "fellowship for the sake of evangelism" (Phil. 1:5).

That was the intention. The receiving churches, however, regarded all these reform-movements as merely propaganda. They regarded them as "sheep-stealers" and spread the rumour that one could sell one's conscience dear to the missions. It was only after these reform-movements had been branded as 'diabolical undermining schemes' and there was no more hope of creating a fellowship, that they really did develop into movements for church-proselytism. A few small groups were created, consisting at first of those who were excluded from the old churches because of their 'evangelical sympathies'. Later on there were the usual changes of church affiliation. It was not possible to celebrate the foundation of these 'evangelical churches' as a triumph. They were all too clear proof of a revival which had failed, leaving the bitter taste of a fiasco.

All that, however, is only one of the aspects of the long history that should be borne in mind if one wants to discuss proselytism seriously with a Greek Orthodox, for instance. But that is just the aspect which is usually completely left out in his version of the story. We often get the impression that he only notices the atrocities caused by all sorts of sectarian misdeeds (which have indeed taken place, and still do), and that he calls these misdeeds 'proselytism', classifying everything that comes from the 'left' under that heading. They regard the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, the Methodist as extremely left-wing - together with the Pentecostalists. All the work of these churches is seen in the same unfavourable light, without considering their intention, method or attitude. And finally they all find themselves, (bien étonnés...) sitting side by side on the penitents' bench as proselytists.

As far as I can judge, during the last few years people have begun to think and to write with more discrimination about this left-wing movement. (7) This opens the possibility for practical discussion which had to remain confused and hopeless as long as the real situation was obscured by passion.

Perhaps it will soon be possible also to correct the Orthodox concept of proselytism on one more point. I have in mind a statement as bold as that of Evdokimov: "Aucun impérialisme ou prosélytisme n'ont jamais entaché l'apostolat orthodoxe." (Orthodox evangelism has never been sullied by imperialism or proselytism.) (8) This is obviously a mistake. In any case, it should be a salutary disillusionment for the Orthodox to hear themselves criticised now by the right-wing churches for the intolerable proselytism in their attitude. The Armenian Church, for instance, regards them as "sheep-stealers" and schismatics of the same type as the Roman Catholics or the Protestants. (9)

From what has been said above it is clear that we can't do much with the word 'proselytism'. The word has become too heavy, filled with uncontrolled sentiments, too fraught with undefinable emotions. It is more suitable for a passionate harangue or an exchange of insults than for practical, realistic discussion. In order to get out of this atmosphere of irritation and to place the problem clearly before us, the World Council started a special study commission in 1956. In a preliminary report this group described its first enquiries: "Christian witness, proselytism and religious liberty within the World Council of Churches." (10) A concentrated document was presented to the churches "for comment and consideration", and it stimulated in some cases further discussion and study of this particularly complicated question.

But even where the subject is treated less explicitly, and where the inauspicious word 'proselytism' is omitted entirely, the question is continually under consideration in ecumenical circles. This is brought out, for instance, in the latest document on evangelism published by the World Council of Churches: "A theological reflection on the work of evangelism", 1959. In this document on nearly every page proselytism is described as the anonymous opposite of evangelism. The authors have been careful to avoid anything which might cause a misunderstanding; sometimes they have been almost too cautious. They knew that people were watching them closely and realised, that they had to tip-toe carefully between ranks of extremely touchy observers who asked them at every step: "But that isn't going to be...?"

To the material hitherto published on proselytism as an ecumenical problem, I should like to add some notes which may also prove useful as questions for further discussion.

From the point of view of the <u>theology of missions</u>: For a long time we took as a model for Christian missions (in our search for 'a biblical basis') the Jewish proselytism described in the New Testament (Matthew 23:15; Acts 2:11; 6:5; 13:43). Not only were

the Jewish proselytist regarded as 'forerunners and pioneers', but they were to give the pattern that, later on, could be adopted and followed by the apostles. At Damascus we consider that Paul changed from a 'Jewish proselytist' into a 'Christian proselytist'; his teaching became different, but the form, the style, the method and the spirit of his work remained the same: Apostolate is christian proselytism.

Of course we realise the differences. But they have usually been regarded as quantative differences: Judaism was petty and parsimonious in its proselytism, hunting for the one proselyte (Matth. 23:15). Christianity, on the other hand, was exuberant and royal in its mission, always seeking the 'multitude' and the 'people'; the apostolate is intensified proselytism. When we asked the experts in other theological disciplines for their advice, our opinions were often confirmed: apostolate, missions, proselytism and propaganda were regarded as more or less the same thing. We have heard a New Testament expert affirm that the proselytism of the Jews was "eine ausgeprägte Missionsreligion" (11) (a distinctly evangelistic religion) and we have seen a historian jump from (Jewish) proselytism to missions or propaganda without turning a hair. (12)

A change is taking place here: we are beginning to realise that Jewish proselytism (and all other variants of it) and Christian mission are diametrically opposed. Usually only a opposite movement is shown: a centripetal movement in proselytism; people are invited to come nearer to the centre where salvation is to be found.. In order to find this salvation they must become full members of the group through which it can be transmitted.. They must give up all other ties and become Jews. In this sphere the predominant symbol is the glory (kabod) of God which draws all men towards itself. The centrifugal movement is evangelism: it leaves Jerusalem and the Jewish group, and goes out to the ends of the earth and to the end of time. Here 'joining' means: moving forward with the others, moving out from the centre. The symbol is the light which goes out toward men, seeking them in the darkness and surprising them. (13)

Up to this point we are usually in agreement with one another. But as soon as a further step has to be taken and we have to give up in practice all conformity of form with proselytism, we usually protest and shrink back. A whole series of publications has been written on evangelism and mission, giving a correct description of these two different movements in the preface and the first fundamental paragraph. But after this good start they often go off on the wrong track, to land right in the middle of church-proselytism. This is noticeable in many details: the centripetal thought slips in again; the group is no longer a vehicle of the message but a mediator of salvation; baptism begins to resemble a Christian circumcision-rite; pagans are spoken of as being opposed to the 'church' instead of as possible converts on whom the light is already shining; and finally the church assumes the rôle of Israel: It regards its

task primarily as concentration upon itself; it follows the typically Jewish movement "von aussen nach innen" (Rosenzweig) and replaces the light which is to lighten the Gentiles by the glory which it claims to possess in itself.

I think we must disentangle ourselves from all these moralising judgments on proselytism in our further discussion. (We need not linger over the erroneous idea of 'purchasing consciences', and there is no need to say more than once that in church circles people should behave like 'gentlemen'.) We shall then be able to think clearly about the exact meaning of mission as the opposite of proselytism. I am sure that the studies undertaken by the Department on Evangelism of the World Council of Churches (including study of the biblical theology of missions) will be a considerable help to us here.

From the point of view of mission work the question whether proselytism is justified or not becomes particularly acute today in India and in Islamic countries (in the Middle East). When the World Council published the document on proselytism, people rightly commented: "This is an issue which has been fermenting beneath the surface for more than a century, since the founding of the modern missionary movement." (14)

In India the tone of the discussion was already set at the beginning of the 19th century. Missionary Dubois then stated in a document which created a sensation, that "not a single Christian proselyte (!) had been gained during the past 60 years, and that in another 50 years' time there probably would not be any trace of Christianity left in India." "Under the existing curcumstances, there is no human possibility of converting the Hindus to any sect of Christianity." This gloomy prophecy prompted missions to seek methods other than proselytism. All kinds of possibilities were considered and tried. After a century of experimentation, the conclusion was described in a book by B. Lucas in which he explicitly opted against proselytism among the Hindus and in favour of 'evangelizing India'; this was to be interpreted as "redeeming the larger corporate units of Indian society into a new community life", as a condition for all personal action. (16)

This was only one voice among many. But afterwards we have been hearing such echoes from many sides, especially from the other side; from the Hindus who protested with increasing vehement against proselytism (Gandhi!) and recently produced the horribly fanatical text of the Nyogi Report (1956) in which a state commission reported its conclusion after "a critical enquiry into all the activities of the missions". Among other things it proposes that henceforward permission to enter India should be refused to "all missions which carry on proselytism".

This extremely sharply worded report, which expressed the feelings of large sections of the population, has clearly had a strong influence on Indian Christians. For instance, suggestions have been made, referring to the Nyogi report, to suspend provisionally anything which might resemble proselytism (including "aggressive evangelism") and, in order to avoid misunderstanding, to confime mission

work to a demonstration of international goodwill or to witness through silent, disinterested service. (17)

In Islam Christian proselytism has again become an object of scandal since the Near East Christian Council put forward in 1938 some suggestions which caused a stir. Realising that in the Near East joining the church might be misinterpreted as a change of nationality, the following idea was put forward: "To develop groups of followers of Jesus who are active in making Him known to others while remaining loyally a part of the social and political groups to which they belong in Islam." Throughout the Middle East there already seem to be little groups of Muslims who call themselves "Friends of Jesus","Disciples of the Way","Friends of the Bible", etc. They are not formal members of any Church and do not wish to call themselves Christians. It has therefore been decided not to insist on making proselytes, nor to ask them to make any public demonstration of their faith (through baptism, for instance) which are bound to be ambiguous, cannot really be taken as 'signs', and would therefore merely strengthen a false notion. Things cannot be hurried. One must wait patiently and watch how the Holy Spirit will guide here.

These are only two examples of mission work. They are mentioned here in order to support the idea, that we must not limit our attention to an 'inter-church problem'. There are already far too many definitions of proselytism in use in which the impression is given, that proselytism merely means 'persuading members of another church to come into ours'. This concept is too narrow and petty. The question of Proselytism really arises there, where the Gospel and the religions meet.

One last foot-note: Walter Freytag repeatedly pointed out, that preaching the Gospel brings to life a new church. We do not continue the old situation, nor do we extend it. We are not attracting people to us, asking them to join our own group - to become proselytes. In passing on the message we are joining those who listen to the Gospel, in the expectation and the hope that there, once again, men will gather in the name of Jesus and that we shall be permitted to witness it.

Perhaps by going out in this disinterested way to others, in a centrifugal movement following the light, abandoning the new 'centre' that we have yet once more established, we may come to realise what mission really is, as opposed to all forms of proselytism (open or concealed). In anticipation of the new church. But there is nothing really strange about that. For what has mission ever been other than anticipation? And ecumenism?...

NOTES

1 L.A. ZANDER, Einheit ohne Vereinigung, Stuttgart 1959, 151 ff.

2 S. NIELSEN, Intoleranz und Toleranz bei Zinzendorf, Marburg o.J., 137 ff.

3 M. KäHLER, Dogmatische Zeitfragen, II, 347 ff.

4 L. NEWBIGIN, The Household of God, London 1953.

5 E. MOLLAND, Christendom, London 1959.

6 Particularly important for documentation: P. KAWERAU, Amerika und die orientalischen Kirchen, Bln. 1958, 425-501.

7 Cf. Ch. KONSTANTINIDES' series of articles about Proselitisme, de Oek. Beweging en de Orthodoxe Kerk, in Theologica 1957-9 and V.C. JOANNIDES, Die Beziehungen der orthod. Ostkirche zu den andersgläubigen Kirchen, in: Die orthod. Kirche in griechischer Sicht, Stuttgart 1960, II, 117-143.

8 P. EVDOKIMOV, L'Orthodoxie, Neuchatel 1959, 166, cf. 344.

9 M. ORMANIAN, The Church of Armenia, London 1955^2, 182 ff.

10 A Dutch version appeared under the title "Wees een Heer ook in het kerkelijk verkeer", 1957; commentary on the WCC-document: E. KINDER in Oek. Rundschau 1957, 9-23. In August 1960 (St. Andrews) the document was revised.

11 N.A. DAHL, Das Volk Gottes, Oslo 1941, 73 ff.

12 M. SIMON, Verus Israel, Paris 1948, 315-355.

13 The contrast proselytism-mission has been worked out very clearly by S. AALEN, Licht und Finsternis im A.T...., Oslo 1951, 88 ff., 202 ff., 282 ff.

14 R.C. JOHNSON, When are we Witnessing and When Proselytizing?, Theol. Tod. 1957, 376.

15 J.A. DUBOIS, Letters on the State of Christ. in India, London 1823.

16 B. LUCAS, Our task in India: Shall we proselyte Hindus or evangelize India?, London 1914.

17 T. ASIRVATHAM, Christianity in the Indian Crucible, Calcutta 1957.

18 K. CRAGG, The Call of the Minaret, New York 1956, 333 ff.

19 Cf. H.J. MARGULL, Theologie der missionarischen Verkündigung, Stuttgart 1959, passim.